



Smelter near Hartford coming down, but toxic waste remains

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MADISON COUNTY • The buildings are being dismantled, but much of the slag that makes the former Chemetco copper smelter one of the nation's most notorious toxic waste sites may not be removed for years.

Demolition at the long-closed plant, an eyesore along Illinois Route 3 near the southern edge of Hartford, began this week under supervision of the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. It is set for completion by Nov. 30.

The cost, borne by the company's bankruptcy estate, was not announced.

The property was placed on the national Superfund list of waste sites in 2010, and the U.S. EPA will supervise disposal of the toxic slag and scrubber sludge that remain.

Maggie Carson, a spokeswoman for the Illinois EPA, said Tuesday that removal of those wastes may take five years. She said the U.S. EPA is trying to identify parties that may be legally responsible under federal law for some of the cleanup costs.

"Somebody made a lot of money here at one time, but it didn't come back to the community," Carson explained.

Erin Rednour of the Illinois EPA said the total cost may run into tens of millions of dollars, with the Superfund paying what is not recovered from others.

Asbestos-containing materials, slag and sludge were removed from the structures before the wrecking crews went to work.

On Tuesday, workers were removing one of four huge manifolds from the top of the foundry building. The devices, designed to collect dust, gave the structure its distinctive appearance.

Chemetco operated the plant, just south of New Poag Road, from 1970 until Oct. 31, 2001, when the company shut it down and filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy. The smelter had 157 workers in 2000.

Chris Cahnovsky, regional enforcement manager for the IEPA's Bureau of Land, said he believes Chemetco violated environmental laws and regulations the entire time that it operated. "This was the worst of the worst," he said.

In 1992, the U.S. EPA called Chemetco the nation's leading emitter of airborne lead. In 1996, state EPA inspectors discovered a pipe the company had secretly built 10 years earlier to carry toxic storm water runoff into a tributary of Long Lake.

In 2000, the company was fined \$3.8 million after pleading guilty of violating the federal Clean Water Act. Five workers were sentenced to probation or in-home detention for their part in the illegal discharges.

Former Chemetco owner and CEO Denis L. Feron, a native of Belgium, eluded authorities for several years and made the U.S. EPA's most-wanted list of industrial polluters. Late last year, federal officials agreed to defer prosecution in return for Feron accepting responsibility for his criminal acts and paying \$500,000 in restitution for use in the restoration of Long Lake and surrounding wetlands.

Feron is in his 80s, in poor health and unable to travel to the United States, according to court documents.

State Sen. William Haine, D-Alton, and state Rep. Dan Beiser, D-Alton, were both on hand for a briefing at the plant Tuesday.

"This was a sordid event in our history," said Haine, formerly the county's state's attorney. "It was a corrupt and irresponsible act to put this plant here in the first place."

The bankruptcy estate sold some of the slag — which was richer in copper — for reprocessing. But a giant pile of waste — about 452,000 cubic yards — remains, as do about 62,000 cubic yards of zinc oxide in various locations. High levels of lead, cadmium and copper are present in the slag.

Lead interferes with a variety of body processes and is particularly toxic to children. Elevated levels of copper can cause liver and kidney damage. Cadmium can contribute to cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

Wind has dispersed dust from the Chemetco site into the air for years, but Cahnovsky said the dangerous substances discharged into Long Lake have not been detected outside the 230-acre site.

He said a local company called Paradigm Minerals & Environmental Services may participate in the site cleanup. The company recently completed a pilot project for the reclamation of valuable metals from the waste materials and submitted its results to the U.S. EPA.